S'Tyge looked down at the steady flow of his lifeblood pumping out past the all the pressure he could apply with hand and stump. "I won't--wish you--a long life. Will your pretty boy--push the button?"

T'serek looked away from the Romulan's death wound to Spock, kneeling over the agony of his ruined hands. Once again he answered, "Yes," for Spock and this time there was no contradiction.

There were no thanks from the Romulan. He squinted through the ocher fog toward T'serek. "I would have had you if I'd lived." It was the last thing he said.

Dray tried to get up and found that he couldn't. Careful to put no pressure on the antimatter device, he crawled to Spock. The Vulcan still knelt motionless, his blackened hands before him. The boy fitted his body to Spock's and slowly eased him to a more comfortable position, supporting the rigid back against his shoulder and chest, coaxing the painwracked Vulcan to relax.

"I have the device," he said. "We don't have to wait."

Fire spattered against the dome again, flaring white-hot and sliding down the energized surface in a trail of sparks. Spock shook his head minutely, a negative, and Dray sighed. His own wounds pained him, but he didn't urge it again, even feeling the long tremors that shook the Vulcan, even when the dark head fell back against his shoulder and he knew Spock was unconscious. He watched the fireworks fountain over them and didn't press the button and toss the device toward the Wielda until the dome failed and the great heat struck in.

Kirk had come from his cabin subdued, but as he immediately ordered the ship in closer to Ixmahx the bridge crew gave him credit for winning another one. He didn't feel victorious. Nomura had granted an extension, but that was all. The interdiction against energy transmissions held good. Kirk had argued that Spock, a highly competent and conscientious officer, was expecting his return, was in company with the high executive of the planet, and might signal for pickup. The admiral had mulled that over and conceded that if Spock observed the ban on transmissions he could be considered to have correctly assessed the situation, possibly to have corrected it. That was the only condition under which Kirk would be allowed to use the transporter, and at that Nomura had tied him up with time limits, bracketing the time Spock might reasonably have expected them to return. Kirk took the ship down until the atmosphere was tickling her, and they still hadn't turned anything up, although he had half the waking crew examining visuals of the surface for a signal.

As they crossed the twilight zone for the fourteenth time, Uhura pointed out the increasing display of the volcano. It was unusual to hit the beginning of an eruption by chance, but not impossible. There was no indication that Spock was involved. But the pulsing glow of the thing did draw the eye, and it was spectacular, an irregular ring of fire around a lava dome that had not yet succumbed to the pyroclastic flow. The regular flare and fade of the mass was strangely compelling....

"Bring her around, Mr. Sulu. Unlock the sensors, I want a reading on that crater. Uhura, look at this."

The communications officer had been monitoring surface sounds in a random pattern with the best "ears" the ship had. She looked back at the firey display again. Her forefinger worked experimentally, and her lips parted.

"It's an SOS, sir. Morse code!"

"There's a forcefield in the center, sir," confirmed Sulu.

"Is there, now." Kirk's grin brightened the bridge by degrees. "Well, who do you suppose knows Morse code on Ixmahx? Transporter--" He gave the technician on duty the particulars and told Sulu he had the con. It would be touchy, with the heat and magnetic anomalies, but Scotty's lads could do it. Even if he had known of the antimatter, it could not have been a factor. Heat alone can destroy. They kept their sensors on the forcefield and went through it like butter the instant it failed. The firey fountain that arched over T'serek's head never touched him.

The technician didn't look up as Kirk entered the transporter room, but he identified the headlong stride and a flash of command gold out of the corner of his eye.

"I've got six--no, it's five of them, sir. One just blinked out on me."

A light or a life? Kirk deliberately lowered his voice to its most soothing register. "It's all right, Brown, just bring them in easy." Premonition made him hit the comm button. "McCoy to transporter; we might have casualties here."

"On our way, Jim" came back to him as Brown's hands moved steadily forward on the levers that materialize the electromagnetic patterns now held stasis. Five living beings...the question being, which five? The dazzle began to solidify above the transporter pads and for a moment the shape was absolutely alien. Kirk wondered if Singh had been right and he was beaming some ancient alien menace aboard. Then he saw what it was, bodies so entangled the machinery had brought in more than one to each receiving station. Nadia and Sunderson stared at him, their eyes rimmed with white. The Speaker had turned his head away on his long neck, eyes shut. A curiously immobile Dray bent over an unconscious Spock whose hands--

"My God," whispered the tech, "what happened to them?"

McCoy was coming. Kirk didn't want to look down again at Spock's hands. He stepped forward and reached toward Nadia, to reassure her. "It's the Captain--" he had started to say when she launched herself right at his face with a squall like a cat. He was off balance and he didn't want to hurt her, which almost cost him an eye. They went down in an undignified heap and he had to roll away and come back before he could get a good grip on her from behind. She fought with the absolutely heedless strength of total desperation, and she was trying to kill him with her bare hands.

"Hit her!" he yelled at the startled technician. Brown's half-hearted blow was entirely inadequate. It didn't even slow her down, and she was twisting and snapping at his hands with her teeth when the door hissed open for McCoy and his medical team. The doctor was not so hesitant. He made an adjustment on his hypo and sprayed something directly into her throat before she could turn and snap at him. Sunderson crumpled into a faint on the transporter pad, and Nadia went limp in Kirk's hands, her weight almost dragging her free of his grip. Two corpsmen relieved him.

"Help Spock," he told McCoy and then turned to the Ixmahx, not sure if another explosion was